



Speech by

Hon. JUDY SPENCE

MEMBER FOR MOUNT GRAVATT

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FIRST SPEECH

Ms SPENCE (Mount Gravatt) (5.42 p.m.): Mr Deputy Speaker, may I begin by extending, through you, my personal congratulations to Mr Speaker on his election to that office. I am certain that in his time as Speaker he will serve with dignity, wisdom and integrity. As well, I extend to you my congratulations on your election to the position of Chairman of Committees.

I would also like to extend congratulations to the members of Her Majesty's Government and particularly to the Premier of this State on a resounding and historic election win. As well, I extend my congratulations to members of Her Majesty's Opposition who have finally been put in their rightful place by the good sense of the Queensland people.

I should like to express my appreciation of, and gratitude to, the electors of Mount Gravatt. They have elected me to this Assembly where I trust that wrongs will be righted and errors, if any, will be few.

I thank all those people who worked so hard to support me in the Mount Gravatt campaign, in particular, my campaign director, Lindesay Jones.

I also express my appreciation to my campaign committee and the members of the Mount Gravatt branch of the Labor Party. But above all, I would like to thank the many citizens of my electorate who knew it was time for a change and devoted their time and energy in order to effect it. Finally, I thank my husband, Heinz, and son, Lucas, for their patience, love and encouragement during a long election campaign.

Let me say at the outset how proud I am to be a politician in this new Government in this new decade of the 1990s. I come to this Parliament at a time in our history when many believe that politicians have become irrelevant, self-seeking and untrustworthy. That Queenslanders should have developed such an outlook is unfortunate but understandable in the light of the bizarre events that have unfolded in this Chamber over the last 32 years. One would have to search hard through the history of Westminster Parliaments to find a comparable period of unbroken rule. Because the National Party regime lasted for a long time, there grew up an idea of normalcy that was illusory.

Queenslanders had begun to expect and accept as normal a Parliament that would sit as little as 28 days a year; a Parliament that was little more than a rubber stamp for a Cabinet that made decisions behind closed doors, where legitimate freedom of speech was brutally crushed, where the voting public was sold paternalism in place of honesty, and where legislation was rushed through in the dead of the night without due thought and consideration.

While I do not intend to dwell on the malaise of the past, I would urge all Queenslanders never to forget the injustices which have been amply revealed by the Fitzgerald inquiry and by many honest Queenslanders—decent Queenslanders who dared to speak out and in doing so made many personal sacrifices.

This State has been well informed of the dangers of failing to demand honesty and accountability in their representatives. I believe that Queenslanders are now prepared to take an even greater interest in the decision-making process of our great State.

The large mandate given to this Labor Government signifies the trust that the Queensland people have placed in us to restore democracy, honesty and fair play to Queensland. Labor's general philosophy has never been more relevant than it is today. Our philosophy of social justice provides the basis for a fairer, more just and egalitarian society. Unlike the conservatives who, when in Government,

choose to capitalise their profits and socialise their losses, the Labor Party stands firm in the belief that greater equality in the distribution of income, wealth and opportunity will benefit all Queenslanders.

Unlike past reformers, this Government will not make the mistake of believing that all that is needed in a democracy is the obtaining of a majority.

We will also change the mental climate in which Parliament and the Government both live and work in order to transform the atmosphere of politics; that is the background, the assumptions, the shared information and perceptions of common goals through which decisions can be made, not just by the Government and the Parliament but by key groups and interests such as business and unions. When this is achieved in an atmosphere that is not primarily motivated by ballot-box considerations, Queenslanders will start to see the qualities of true leadership which they want in their political representatives.

I firmly believe that the election of nine women to this Chamber will also help make this Parliament more representative. When we consider women make up 51 per cent of the Queensland population, it is extraordinary that it has taken over 129 years for women to achieve anything approaching collective representation in Queensland politics.

Women representatives in this Government will help to strengthen the nurturing principle which dictates that the greatest attention should be devoted to those in greatest need. This suggests not only a different distribution of social resources but also a different response to issues such as the environment, cultural expression and the law. Modification of the public agenda by women active in the formal political arena will be part of the broader economic and social changes that will influence the lives of Queenslanders in the 1990s.

The increased participation of women in higher education and the paid work force, combined with smaller family units, have brought tremendous changes this century to all countries of the Western World. These changes have freed many women, whilst imposing upon many others the increasing burden of the double shift. But was it not always thus? The conservatives in Australian politics keep harking back to "the good old days" when women remained in the home tending the hearth, children and husband, but such a vision belittles women's role throughout history.

While managing all of the former, women have also been farmers, cottage manufacturers, healers, labourers and much more. The freedoms and rights which women have achieved this century should make the burden of the double shift easier, not more onerous.

I am pleased to represent a party which, after many years of soul-searching, has come to accept this challenge. This Labor Government will consider the implications for women in all its policies. I am confident this Government will ensure that Queensland women are guaranteed access to services, equity, a rightful role in decision-making and, above all, their rights as citizens.

We are committed to establishing a women's policy unit to advise Government and to liaise between departments on programs affecting women. This Government is also committed to anti-discrimination legislation and the repeal of any legislation which discriminates against women.

That the demand for quality child-care is placed firmly on the political agenda of every Labor Government in this country is a testament to the role played by women in politics. Few would disagree that child-rearing should be the responsibility of both parents and the community generally and the complex demands of children should be met through programs which complement the parent. As child-care benefits both the child and the adult, all adults, whether in paid or unpaid work, should have access to care for their children.

Society can no longer expect that child-rearing and unpaid welfare work will automatically be done by women. The State has the responsibility to provide quality, affordable child-care not as a welfare service but as a micro-economic necessity for its long-term economic well-being.

In my electorate of Mount Gravatt a large percentage of the labour force is women. There is a shortage of child-care places, particularly for children under three years of age; there is insufficient occasional child-care and after-school care. One of this Government's fundamental objectives will be to increase the range of choices available to Queensland families throughout the State. Child-care options can strengthen and protect the family unit by offering a range of services to assist parents in combining child-rearing responsibilities with work, study and leisure. I know that many families of Mount Gravatt will welcome these initiatives.

Education facilities in my electorate also need attention. My occupation before coming to this place was that of a high school teacher. I know first hand the detrimental effects resulting from an underdeveloped education system—a system that has suffered 32 years of neglect by National Party Governments whose perception of intellectuals and the education system was one of suspicion and contempt.

In the north, in the west and in urban centres of the coast, school buildings lack adequate cooling and heating systems to facilitate a healthy and productive learning environment. Queensland children struggle to learn in classes which are often far too large and inadequately resourced.

Queensland teachers' perceptions of their professional value have decreased with their deteriorating wages and working conditions.

While my electorate of Mount Gravatt is not among the worst in terms of facilities, even so the schools in my electorate suffer the common difficulties of a lack of trained special teachers such as remedial, music, language and resource personnel. They, too, suffer from oversized classes and they suffer from a tertiary entrance system in which the public has lost faith. I can assure Queenslanders that the Labor Government will place the education needs of our children above party politics.

The National Party Government deserted young Queenslanders in areas other than the education system, though. That Government also turned its back on the youth unemployment crisis. Whilst other States grappled with this devastating problem, the previous Government spent \$2.40 per head on employment and training schemes—less than half the amount spent by the next lowest spending State. The number of apprentices training in Queensland remains at the level reached in 1980, despite the significant increase in population in this period. Queensland's youth unemployment rate is the highest of any mainland State.

All of us share the consequences of a large group of disaffected young people. These aimless youth take out their frustration by committing acts of vandalism to schools, shops and railway stations. They start taking drugs and they waste away their time at shopping centres and in our city mall.

In the main, our society has done little to provide recreational community centres. There are none in existence in my electorate. For those fortunate enough to be interested in sport, there are possibilities of joining a sporting association. However, not all young people want to play sport. Many of them have little desire to participate in formal clubs or associations of any kind.

No Government in this State has ever tackled the issue of providing community recreational facilities for our youth. At this point of time I would like to congratulate the work done by those church and community groups that provide various programs. But the ad hoc arrangements that now exist are clearly not enough.

Spending on education, training, employment, accommodation and recreational facilities for our youth is not a financial burden, but an essential, productive investment.

This Government recognises that this State will be unable to meet the challenges of the 1990s unless we develop the most important resource of all—our children. Our young people need to be better prepared for their own future and for the future of this State and country.

Having mentioned the subject of apprentices, I would like now to mention briefly the history of the company GEC Australia Limited at Rocklea. It just falls outside my electorate boundary but it is a sizeable employer of my constituents. In the mid-1970s this heavy manufacturing company employed 1 400 men and women and trained 45 apprentices per year. Today it employs 430 people and trains 7 apprentices. It has seen other great neighbouring manufacturing institutions, such as Evans Deakin Industries Limited, Commonwealth Engineering and Sargents close their plants in the last decade.

Today, GEC is operating well below its capacity. It has recently seen Government contracts go to off-shore and interstate companies even though its tenders were competitive. The workers there want fair play for fair tenders. They hope for some recognition for the part that they play in employing Queenslanders and training our young apprentices. Companies such as GEC have the infrastructure and the potential to play an important part in Queensland's future.

I turn now to another matter which concerns those of the Mount Gravatt community living in retirement villages. For some time, residents of these villages have been campaigning for fairer legislation concerning the operation and management of the retirement village industry; an industry, I might add, that is burgeoning in this State and one which can realistically expect to continue growing as our population ages and the northern migration of retirees from southern States continues.

A number of the people domiciled in these villages are lured there by the attraction of glossy brochures and slick salespeople. However, they may then find that the financial reality of life in the complex does not match their expectations.

They must pay commercial rates for residential services. In Brisbane, these residents are forced to pay an extra \$6 a week pedestal tax which house and unit-dwellers do not pay. The residents are denied pensioner discounts on their rates. They are locked into paying weekly management fees which are eating into their savings or pensions. In one case, in the space of three years, these charges have risen from \$28 to \$55 a week.

Many retirement villages have nursing centres or care units to which residents may be moved for medical or nursing attention. All of these units as well as the common dining and recreational areas are charged commercial electricity rates, a burden that must be borne by the residents.

Above and beyond normal Brisbane City Council rates, these villages are required to pay land tax. In one of the villages in my electorate, this is in excess of \$10,000 per annum. This is yet another tax that is passed on to the residents.

These retirement villages are not enclaves of the rich. Some of the residents are on pensions; others are on fixed incomes. They have planned a life-style which, far from making them a burden on their families or society, offers them personal and financial freedom. We should be applauding their initiative and ensuring that these residents receive a fair go.

Sitting suspended from 6 to 7.30 p.m.

Ms SPENCE: Before the dinner recess I was referring to the problems experienced in retirement villages in my electorate and in the State generally. In its first term in office, this Government will address these and related issues. I give a guarantee of my personal attention to these matters. This Government will ensure that the industry can continue to grow in a manner which will benefit developer and resident alike, and provide a favourable environment in which most people are able to arrange their own accommodation.

This Government has a strong philosophic commitment to the right of all to decent, affordable housing. It recognises that there are significant groups in the community who are at a disadvantage when it comes to buying their own homes or even affording market prices for rented accommodation. This includes young couples who are usually among the lowest income-earners, the unemployed, the elderly, the sick, deserted wives and supporting parents. There are many of these people in my electorate who, because of the previous Government's disgraceful performance in providing public housing, have no alternative but to rely on the private sector. In the past the Housing Commission did not allow single young people under 18 years of age to rent their accommodation. Even if these young people had children of their own, the Housing Commission's doors were closed to them. The media has alerted us all to the sad plight of the homeless youth or street kids, as they have come to be known. I am pleased to be able to report that our Housing Minister is doing something about this issue now. This Government looks forward to the day when all Queenslanders, no matter what their circumstances, are decently housed. Homelessness, fear of eviction and inadequate housing have no place in this Government's plans for the future.

Although it has been in office for less than 100 days, this Government has already commenced implementation of its Home Ownership Made Easier Scheme, which is designed to narrow the deposit gap for home-seekers, and it has given approval for the construction of new Housing Commission houses and units. I am pleased to announce that the State Housing Commission will spend \$2.4m upgrading the standard of its accommodation units for aged pensioners in my electorate. In future all unit designs will be wheelchair accessible so that eventually people will be able to stay in their locality after retirement.

Also of great concern to many citizens in my electorate is the runaway crime rate that has caused decent, law-abiding citizens to feel under siege in their own community. In particular, many of my constituents are concerned about their own personal safety. In the last decade, offences such as assaults, rapes, breaking and entering of homes, stealing and unlawful use of motor vehicles have increased markedly. It is a sad indictment on our society to hear that many elderly people are afraid to walk the streets alone during the day as well as at night. It is sad to speak to people who have lost confidence in their police force because they know that this force is understaffed and underfunded and therefore unable to arrest the upward spiral of crime.

Law-abiding Queenslanders have a right to expect a safe and secure environment in which to live and raise their families. This is the first right of any citizen. It is also the first responsibility of Government. This Government knows that fundamental to the creation of such an environment is the police force, courts and penal system having sufficient resources and crime-fighting powers to carry out their jobs. These systems must be strong enough not only to constitute a deterrent to criminal activity, but also to afford physical protection to the community against criminal activity when deterrence has failed. The public want to see police out on the job and the police themselves want to be out there preventing crime. The Fitzgerald report is very clear on the methods by which that can be achieved. This Government will take heed of those recommendations in order to streamline work practices within the police force and institute community policing programs. The electors of this State, particularly those in Brisbane, were shocked and disgusted to learn of the firmly entrenched abuses in the police force. They have given this Government the mandate to stop corruption and abuses, and I can assure my constituents that, as a member of the police ministerial committee, I will be working to honour that commitment.

I now move on to an environmental issue that is of importance to the Mount Gravatt electorate, that is, the future of Toohey forest. Today, Toohey forest consists of approximately 650 hectares of bushland in the midst of my electorate. In many respects, Toohey forest is a case study in the evolution of urban bushland parks. In the first instance, much of the Toohey forest area remained undeveloped because it was unsuitable for timber production and mining, and, because of the steep slopes and poor soils, it was unsuitable for agriculture or urban settlement. As urban development expanded and surrounded Toohey forest, it was seen as a useful area in which to establish cemeteries, quarries, sporting facilities and two tertiary institutions. As a result, there are now a number of governmental and semi-governmental bodies acting as land-holders.

Now that bushland is scarce in metropolitan Brisbane, community attitudes towards urban bushland have changed. Residents have a growing appreciation of the contribution that the area makes to the quality of life in our city and recognise that as a scarce resource it does require special management. The future of Toohey forest has been an issue in many election campaigns, with previous Liberal and National Party members professing a desire to do something about Toohey forest, but little was achieved. When further development, such as the Bond Corporation's move to develop a residential subdivision, threatened Toohey forest, it took residential protest groups to halt the plan. This Government has pledged to establish an enforceable and comprehensive Toohey forest management plan that will protect the forest under law so that this major recreational and bushland area may be properly conserved. It has been said that the 1980s will be remembered as the decade of environmental consciousness. Dire warnings of the consequences of the greenhouse effect and ozone depletion have alerted all members of our society to the potentially disastrous consequences of abusing the environment in which we live.

Throughout the decades of National/Liberal Government, development has been pursued at any cost, without concern for protecting the environment. This Labor Government has been left a legacy of environmental mismanagement, which has caused land degradation, beach erosion, the destruction of coastal wetlands, unabated coastal development and air and water pollution. Although members of the Labor Party do not purport to have all the answers to the problems caused by this disastrous environmental legacy, this Government is committed to repairing the damage. Already the Government has released a report on the state of the environment in Queensland and has invited public comment. However, no Government ever achieves anything on its own. Only the cooperation and goodwill of the entire community will solve the environmental challenges of this new decade.

Mr Deputy Speaker, in conclusion I would like to say that, as I stand in this Chamber today, I am proud to walk in the footsteps of the previous Labor member for Mount Gravatt, Dr Felix Dittmer, who held this seat from 1952 to 1957 and then went on to represent Queensland in the Federal Senate. Dr Dittmer made outstanding contributions to public life in Queensland and I hope to be able to follow his example.

During the 32 years when my electorate was denied a Labor representative in this Parliament, the Mount Gravatt branch of the Labor Party stayed loyal to the Labor cause. Today I would like to pay tribute to two longstanding branch members, Brian Fenton and Len Bithisel, who have served the Labor movement in this State for 32 years and 26 years respectively. Many men and women have worked tirelessly along with them for the social betterment of my generation. The securing of full results from their industry is now the responsibility of the 54 Government members of this Chamber. Young people such as I have never known the humane legislation of a State Labor Government.

To the people of the Mount Gravatt electorate, I pledge my efforts over the next three years towards the goal of a more democratic, socially responsible society for all Queenslanders.
